

## Article

# The Soka Gakkai Practice of *Buppō* and the Discourse on Religion in Japan

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**Abstract:** This paper investigates the Japanese Nichiren Buddhist organization, Soka Gakkai (SG), whose members have supported the political party known as Kōmeitō, or Clean Government Party, in Japan for over half a century. SG members have often been criticized as ‘impure’ political actors, undergoing frequent public questioning of their motivations for engaging in electoral politics in light of their ‘religious’ status. The paper shows how the SG members’ support for Kōmeitō at a qualitative level indeed transcends the typical demarcations of the ‘secular-religious’ binary system. However, they also simultaneously challenge the term ‘religion’ that has functioned as an ideology in the creation of statecraft and in their competition for legitimacy. The current paper is based on long-term fieldwork, extensive interviews, and doctrinal analyses that highlight how socially productive this discourse on religion has been. It also shows how a counter-episteme, rooted in Nichiren’s theory of the *Risshō Ankoku Ron* and the idea of *kōsen-rufu*, sought to bring a ‘Buddha’ consciousness to bear on individual and collective action as a model for alternative ‘politics’. Contrary to many claims, this did not entail contesting the modern institutional separation of ‘church’ and ‘state’, but is rather an attempt to find legitimacy for participating in ‘Japan-making’ in ways that cannot easily be understood or confined to explanations framed within the ‘religious-secular’ binary system.

**Keywords:** critical religion; discourse on religion in Japan; Soka Gakkai; Kōmeitō; religion and politics in Japan; *buppō*; *ōbutsu myōgō*; life-state



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## 1. Introduction

The relationship between ‘politics’ and ‘religion’ is often perceived to be a fraught one, in light of the modern classification that imagines two incommensurate realms—the moral absolutes of ‘religion’ and its call to a higher power, and the art of compromise seen as being central to ‘politics’ in the ‘secular’ world. Intersecting these forbidden boundaries allows entry into a realm of ‘in-between’, a state of ‘impurity’ to draw upon the words of Mary Douglas (1966). This paper investigates the Japanese Nichiren Buddhist organization of Soka Gakkai (SG), whose members have supported a political party called the Kōmeitō, or the Clean Government Party, in Japan since 1964. As ‘political’ actors, SG members have often been denigrated as ‘impure’, frequently having their motives questioned by the public as being something other than their stated goal of contributing to creating a society that can uphold human dignity (Fisker-Nielsen 2011). I argue that the SG members’ support for Kōmeitō at a qualitative level indeed transcends the typical demarcation of the ‘religious-secular’ divide. However, this is not the usual method by which their critics took this as overstepping the institutional separation of ‘church’ and ‘state’ (e.g., Davis 1991; Eto and Hichiri 2003; Yamada 2004; Shimada 2007). Rather, ‘religion’ in SG is understood to be a ‘social’ and ‘cultural’ practice that begins with drawing on a ‘life-force’ (*seimei ryoku* 生命力) in ways that impact an individual person’s actions, and as part of aiming to create a broader sense of community. SG’s conceptual framework, its system of meaning, and collective actions, however, remain ‘bounded by the human world’; there is no ‘flight from the world into the self’ as Hannah Arendt (1958) described the long human tradition of

seeking ‘salvation’ ‘beyond the world’, whether in the form of Plato’s ideal forms, monastic life, or even space travel. Amid a multilayered and complex discourse on ‘religion’ in Japan, SG faced the religious-secular boundaries that are taken for granted, which prescribed ‘religion’ as something that deals with ‘flights’ from the world that simultaneously makes the ‘world’ appear ‘secular’.

Investigating how SG’s discursive practice contests, adapts to and adopts the term ‘religion’, which is typically wielded to pass judgment on particular groups who seek participation in Japanese society, highlights the way that SG has been criticized for acting too much ‘in the world’ in a way that is deemed ‘inappropriate’ for a ‘religion’. This paper explores how SG has become the biggest Buddhist organization in postwar Japan, with around ten million members, and the way it has refused to have its collective actions dismissed by labeling them ‘religious’, along with the problematic term ‘public good’, within the realm of competitive electoral politics. More broadly, attempts to use ‘religion’ as a label was a way to dismiss those alternative voices of individual conscience that did not adhere to the normative order framed by the ‘secular-religious’ narrative. This paper discusses selected episodes when attempts were made to banish these alternative voices from participating in common public life, wielding the term ‘religion’ as a form of ‘common sense’ that normalized certain voices and gave others a stigmatized or ‘spoiled’ identity (Goffman 1963). In this paper, I explore the question: how, then, does SG differ from the supposedly ‘secular’ position? I also ask to what extent our analysis would benefit from doing away with the term ‘religion’ altogether as an analytical category, as has been suggested by Horii (2020a). Would we gain from thinking through a less abstract terminology, one that is essentially an ideological framework? The paper explores the potential academic benefit of focusing more directly on ‘value-orientation’ (Graeber 2001), avoiding the abstract term ‘religion’ that subconsciously incorporates particular moral evaluations of the subject under study.

This paper draws upon long-term fieldwork undertaken within SG in Japan, first begun with Ph.D. fieldwork research in 2003–2004, and continued during yearly visits to Japan ever since. Such ongoing first-hand participant observations have included attending hundreds of local SG meetings, primarily in the Tokyo area, as well as in Okinawa prefecture. I have also conducted hundreds of interviews and engaged in many more informal conversations, focusing in particular on young people in their 20s and 30s, as well as undertaking dozens of group interviews with participants across the generations. Over the past four years, since moving to Japan in 2017 and taking up a teaching position at Soka University, my fieldwork, interviews, and conversations expanded into an ongoing research project. Recent conversations with young SG members studying at Soka University also reveal how understandings of the term ‘religion’ or *shūkyō* 宗教 tend to differ from general associations wherein this term is not associated with visiting Shinto shrines, ancestor veneration, praying for good luck and acquiring amulets and talismans, while this behavior is considered ‘religious’ for most SG members. Apart from extensive first-hand observations, participation observation, conversations, and interviews, I have also undertaken a close analysis of the relevant doctrinal issues and interpretations, as well as reviewing the historical records of the SG movement. This research forms the basis of this article.

SG doctrine is based on Nichiren’s (1222–1282) idea of *buppō* or ‘Buddhist dharma’. This is taken to constitute a practice by which to realize the theory that a ‘Buddha’ consciousness of compassion, wisdom, and courage is possible in the human condition, a state that is sought after as the basis for human interaction and that frames what it means to SG members to act like a ‘Buddhist’. Habito (1999, p. 299) describes Nichiren as having a grounded or bodily awareness of living the Lotus Sutra’s predictions of persecution for the sake of promoting the ‘dharma’ as an embodied practice of belief in the potential for universal ‘Buddhahood’. In Nichiren’s terminology, *myōhō*, or Mystic Law, is the ‘dharma’, expressed fully as *myōhō-rengē-kyō* 妙法蓮華經. Habito argues that a mystical sense of cosmic plenitude accompanied Nichiren’s every thought, word, and action (ibid.), which

distinguished his approach as action-oriented rather than contemplative. The *ji no ichinen sanzen* 事の一念三千 (concretized, particularized cosmic plenitude), rather than *ri no ichinen sanzen* 理の一念三千 (conceptualized, universal plenitude) lay in his emphasis on actualizing the ‘Buddha consciousness’ in individual action. Habito argues that Nichiren wanted a return to a more concretized Tendai, or Zhiji’s (538–597) Lotus School position. SG follows Nichiren’s premise that it is the practice of actualizing theory over simply contemplating the principles of the Lotus Sutra that counts as being a practitioner. This attempt to organizationally actualize human action, based upon a belief in the idea of universal ‘Buddhahood’ as the ideal locus for the acting individual in any endeavor, has meant a focus on being capable of expressing an empathetic, ethical imagination of oneself as being intertwined with the reality of others.

A much read and quoted Nichiren writing in SG states that: ‘ordinary people keep in mind the words ‘earnest resolve’ and thereby become Buddhas.’ (Nichiren 1999, p. 1125). Nichiren’s worldview, as rooted in the Tendai doctrine of *ichinen sanzen*, is the principle that ‘one thought moment comprises three thousand realms.’ This presents the individual ‘mind-heart’ or *kokoro* as in a state of flux; there is no stable or final subjecthood, or subjectivity, but rather a state of internal change whereby the ‘reality’ of an individual life depends upon the person’s ‘life-state’. How a person feels, how they reason, their attitude and mindset, and their ability to see a broader and deeper context is seen as crucial for engaging in ‘value-creation’, or *sōka*, from which Soka Gakkai derives its name. This state of ‘constant becoming’ is seen to operate by a principle of ‘mutual possession of the ten worlds’ (or ‘life-states’)<sup>1</sup> one of which is the ‘Buddha’ consciousness. This is expressed both in text and by SG members as the most expansive and deeply felt sense of connected ‘self’, and is characterized by courage, compassion, and wisdom. Nichiren proposed that this life-state is accessible through the practice of chanting *nam[u]-myōho-renge-kyō* 妙法蓮華經 to Nichiren’s *honzon*, the object for observing the mind of the ‘Buddha’.

How the SG movement concretized this idea of ‘universal Buddhahood’ and came to intersect with the modern Western concept of ‘religion’ as the central conceptual pillar of the modern Japanese nation-state (Josephson 2012), I consider here in relation to: (1) the challenges the SG organization posed to the discourse on ‘religion’ in postwar Japan, which fundamentally set up ‘good religion’ as those groups who confined themselves within state-sanctioned notions of ‘public good’, and who followed the norm for ‘religious’ groups who may engage in ‘politics’ but only to support individual candidates for elections and not a political party; and (2) the moral ambivalence that SG members faced as a result of the ‘public gaze’ or *sekentei* 世間体, which built upon assumptions about SG as a potentially ‘bad religion’ that had become associated with the narrative of ‘State Shinto’ (Hardacre 2017; Thomas 2019). I argue that these dynamics hinge upon SG’s reading of *buppō* as a ‘social’ practice borne out of Nichiren’s writing the *Risshō Ankoku Ron* (RAR). Taking on the mandate of realizing the ‘correct [teachings] for the peace of the land’ (RAR) would inevitably challenge the status quo of state-societal relations. This ‘correct teaching’ created new models for tension and ambivalence that intertwined with media representations of SG, in relation to the idea of ‘religion’ as something pertaining to either custodians of older traditions, or as something primarily useful to encourage volunteers in communities or as upholders of various state-sanctioned activities. In supporting its own political party, SG members committed to a vision for a different ‘common’ and ‘public good’. The millions who joined SG came to feel empowered by believing that their actions and votes mattered in concrete ways to attain the kind of world they envisioned, as one long-term supporter, a man in his 60s from north Tokyo, expressed it: ‘Supporting Kōmeitō is bringing humanism [*ningen shugi* 人間主義] to the world of politics.’

This particular lens offers a rich body of experiences whose examination has often been hampered by the unconscious imposition of Western narratives upon culturally and historically divergent worldviews and social practices. ‘Religion’ as a conceptual tool, here reflects its lack of a clear and stable meaning. As argued by Taira (2013, p. 26), the binary of the ‘religious-secular’ conceptual model cast ‘religion’ as an empty signifier that can

be ‘historically, socially, and culturally constructed and negotiated in various situations.’ However, its emptiness at the core, like the ‘imagined community’ (Anderson 1983), carries far-reaching potentiality for ‘reality-making’, as also argued by Beckford (2003, p. 24). This paper hopes to make some contribution to a recognition of the significance of the debates begun by Fitzgerald that ‘[t]he category “religion” should be the object, not the tool, of analysis’ (Fitzgerald 2000, p. 106), to avoid making invisible its ideological use that otherwise continues to generate much theorizing about Others in relation to Oneself.

## 2. Using the Term ‘Religion’ to Demarcate ‘Difference’ and ‘Impurity’

SG’s support for Kōmeitō was and continues to be typically categorized as ‘religious’ (Eto and Hichiri 2003; Yamada 2004; Shimada 2007; Baffelli 2009; Ehrhardt et al. 2014). This categorization assumes an underlying essence of something that can be defined as ‘religious’. Such a demarcation of ‘difference’ in supposedly secular contexts is marked as a form of ‘impurity’ within the context of daring to enter the arena of competing public debate as to what should define the ‘common good’ and, thus, also the direction of Japanese government policies. The term ‘religion’ involves employing a set of assumptions about ‘something’ supposedly set apart from other spheres. Failing to account for the ideological nature of these assumptions, the term ‘religion’ silences the taken-for-granted understandings by which the religious-secular binary is imagined, and, to use Bourdieu’s terminology, is wielded as ‘symbolic violence’ (Bourdieu 1989; Wacquant 2007) when a normative order is used to delegitimize alternative positions. The founder of SG, Tsunesaburo Makiguchi (Gebert 2004; Goulah and Gebert 2014; Gebert in this volume), had also pointed to the ideological use of the term ‘religion’ in the context of imperial Japan; contesting the ideological nature of the term ‘religion’ and reconstituting the meaning of the term could be said to be at the heart of the post-1945 SG organization in Japan, at which point it grew into the largest Buddhist group but also attracted the most criticism.

Central to this development is the discursive entanglements that, from the early Meiji period onward, came to define *belief* as something by which ‘religion’ could be distinguished from the ostensibly ‘non-religious secular’ activities that, by the same token, supposedly contained an absence of ‘belief’. The 1890 Constitution of Imperial Japan created the rationale that ‘belief’ could be distinguished from public rites and ceremonies, which now became the realm of ‘public morality’. By this classification, the concept of ‘non-religious secular’ activities was created (see Josephson 2012; Isomae 2003, 2014; Maxey 2014). As ‘belief’ became classified as a ‘private’ matter, and ‘public morality’ as something people demonstrated through compliance with the expected behavior of ‘good’ and ‘proper’ Japanese citizens, regardless of personal ‘belief’, the state naturalized its norms and rituals as ‘non-religious secular’ behavior. Public rites and ceremonies were not supposed to invoke a ‘religious’ sense of community but instead a ‘moral’ one, which could thereby be defined as ‘secular’ and, thus, be deemed appropriate for a modern nation-state. Despite ceremonies, rituals and edicts containing devotions to the emperor as a divine figure, it was possible to maintain the position that ‘belief’ was a private matter and something amorphous to do with ‘religion’. This ‘non-religious secular’ (Josephson 2012) realm of public morality signified ‘Japan’ as a modern ‘civilized’ nation that presented a separation of ‘church and state’, the pivotal criterion for ‘civilization’ by the end of the nineteenth century (Isomae 2003, 2014). This arbitrary distinction meant that the term ‘religion’ could not only be demarcated and defined as inferior to the realm of the ‘non-religious secular’ but could also be wielded as a norm and convention by which to control groups, thereby being able to evaluate them as either ‘orthodox’ or ‘heterodox’ vis-a-vis their ‘religious’ position and proximity to the operations of the state (Garon 1997).

In the sections to come, I discuss how Nichiren Buddhist doctrines were used by SG to build a significant mass movement in postwar Japan through its modern interpretations of *buppō*, or the idea of the ‘Buddhist law’. In doing so, the organization had to negotiate the prevailing assumptions about its ‘religious’ nature in order to claim legitimate participation in the nation-state project. The praxis of ‘human revolution’ was SG’s modern take on



Nichiren's reading of the doctrine of *ichinen sanzen*. This presented the individual not as 'religious' but as an embodied being existing in a system of meaning and human relations; furthermore, to understand its SG identity, I look at how the organization sought participation in 'the world', both as a model for deeper human connectivity and for practical engagement in 'society'.

SG based itself on the idea of 'human revolution', or 'self-transformation', as being necessary for a deeper change in human practices; in the context of Japan, this came to involve support for a political party to promote 'humanist' policies. In the context of postwar Japan, the establishment of Kōmeitō, or the Clean Government Party, in 1964 is less surprising given the conditions of postwar Japan, the reading of Nichiren doctrine, and SG's own history of persecution during the years of Japanese militarism. However, set within the discourse on religion that postulates 'religion' and 'politics' as being opposing realms, and specific notions of 'good religion' as something that is of service to a particular model for the 'public good' (*koeki* 公益), SG's engagement appeared significantly different from common perceptions of 'religion' as a 'public good'. In particular, how should one understand the 'chanting' that members engage in if not in a 'religious' sense? How can chanting during election activities be seen as anything but 'religion' interfering in politics? In 2021, SG members could be observed, as in the past, engaging in what others deem 'religious' behavior, i.e., chanting, which, by definition, is seen as inappropriate in relation to offering support for Kōmeitō as a political party. On the other hand, SG sees the process of 'human revolution', or inner transformation of the life-state, the reason they chant, as not divorced from any other 'worldly affairs'; in fact, they deemed this a more credible way to contribute to the 'common good' and human 'dignity' through this inner focus on intention. At each election, some opponents or academics will deem the SG approach, in particular the chanting of its members, as the crossing over of 'religion' into the 'political' giving the canvassing for Kōmeitō a particular 'religious' character (see Baffelli 2009).

The rest of this article explores selected episodes that highlight such a tension. At the same time, I point to what often seem tautological explanations for these effectively discursive battles for legitimacy. The arbitrary distinction often made within the 'religious-secular' binary system has been the subject of 'critical religion' (e.g., Fitzgerald 2000; Masuzawa 2005; McCutcheon 1997, 2001; Horii 2016, 2020a, 2020b), which historicized the term 'religion' as a way to question its usefulness as an analytical category. Herein, I also question the usefulness of the term 'religion' as an analytical tool by considering its ideological function in the context of SG's support of Kōmeitō. As a conceptual tool, the term 'religion' is a model for authority that restricts certain groups and people from entering arenas that are defined as ostensibly 'secular'. In its normative use, the term 'religion' can be constituted as a form of 'symbolic violence' (Bourdieu 1989) in terms of its subtle imposition as a system of meaning to legitimize a certain societal order. Moreover, what makes applying the term 'religion' to the context of SG arguably even more problematic is that Nichiren Buddhism is not located in the popularly and institutionally imagined spaces of rituals, sacred places, or ordained priests, but rather in individual intention and action. SG's attempts at engagement are a claim that 'Buddhism' should be something 'social', something impactful on human behavior and carrying a value-orientation of 'Buddhist Humanism'. Millions of people have found engaging in creating such a 'society' to be a model for self-empowerment, by which they could take charge of their private and communal life. The success of this movement inevitably posed challenges to the modern nation-state's disciplinary powers, whereby 'power is exercised within discourses in the ways in which they constitute and govern individual subjects' (Weedon 1987, p. 113; see also Foucault [1971] 1991), contained in this case within the religious-secular binary conceptualization.

### 3. The Multifaceted and Socially Productive Term 'Religion'

As indicated above, I do not refer to debates within the theory of 'secularization' and the extent to which 'religion' is discussed as having either declined or increased (see Reader

2012). Rather, in the context of Japan, I look at how ideas about ‘religion’ demarcated the spheres of ‘purity’ and ‘orthodoxy’ by projecting the term ‘religion’ at the level of doxa. Doxa is defined as the ‘immediate belief in the facticity of the world that makes us take it for granted’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, p. 73); in this case, SG’s support for Kōmeitō is taken in contrast to other electoral support groups whose actions are taken to be ‘secular’, while that of SG members is seen as ‘religious’ without questioning to what this actually refers, and whether this makes sense more objectively.

The discourse on religion continued to change in significant ways in post-1945 Japan. As discussed below in relation to SG, and as demonstrated in different contexts by Horii (2018), ‘religion’ is an ambiguous term that can be interpreted in different directions depending on the situation and the individual or group involved; Talal Asad famously sets out to show how ‘a universal definition of religion is impossible not only because its constituent elements and relationships are historically specific, but also because that definition is itself the historical product of discursive formation’ (Asad 1993, p. 116). Without repeating these arguments here, suffice is to say that what ‘religion’ signifies is far from self-evident, nor is it something easily juxtaposed as opposite to the ‘secular’. The term continues to be commonly used by scholars, popularly, and in the public sphere, despite or perhaps because of its ideological function in Japanese society (see Horii 2020a, 2020b for an overview). SG evidently had to contend with a discourse on religion that could project its ‘impure’ status because of its unwillingness to constrain its ‘beliefs’ as a private matter. This challenged the embedded postwar taboos of not talking about ‘politics’ or ‘religion’. The challenge from SG lay in presenting ‘religion’ as something that pertained to the bounded human world of behavior. Its interpretation of *buppō*, framed as ‘religion’ in the postwar period, challenged common conceptions of a ‘public good’ and the parameters of what activities ‘religion’ is supposed to engage in.

Horii (2018) has shown how the notion of ‘public good’ changed in the postwar period, while also remaining a powerful ideological tool by which groups could legitimize their status as ‘religions’. He (Horii 2018, p. 201) argues that to prove institutional legitimacy, those groups seeking incorporation under the rubric ‘religion’ needed to encompass that which the state deemed *kōeki*, a ‘public good’. Thomas (2019) demonstrates how such legitimization intertwined with that of the Allied Occupation Forces (1945–1952) and the narrative that constructed the Occupation as a chance to obtain ‘religious freedom’, subsequently institutionalized as a key human right. Thomas shows how the narrative of the Allied Powers as bringers of ‘religious freedom’ intersected with the establishment in 1951 of the *Shin Nihon Shūkyō Dantai Rengō Kai* 新日本興宗教連, the ‘League Association of Religious Organizations for the New Japan’ (more commonly referred to as the Federation of New Religious Organizations, or Shinshūren). The groups under Shinshūren were now classified as ‘new religions’ and were presented as groups having suffered persecution because of their struggle for ‘religious freedom’ in pre-1945 times. Thomas (2019) argues that this helped to demarcate their legitimacy as groups useful for a liberal democratic ‘secular’ government that upheld ‘religious freedom’, in the process, legitimizing the narrative of the Allied Forces as bringers of ‘religious freedom’ and ‘democracy’. This narrative of the Occupation as having ‘rescued’ Japan from its own ‘totalitarian’ madness (Lummis 2007; Fisker-Nielsen Forthcoming) constructed the idea that Japan’s military imperialism was intricately linked to ‘religion gone wrong’. These sentiments become deeply associated with the postwar term ‘State Shinto’ that was first used on 15 December 1945 (see also Hardacre 2017, pp. 441–73).

The effect was, thus, to cement a narrative of a past totalitarian regime that had arisen due to ‘religion gone bad’ for which the term ‘State Shinto’ became representative (Thomas 2019, p. 230). This simplified a multifaceted history of Japanese colonialism, bringing it into a binary narrative of ‘good religion’ having been suppressed without ‘religious freedom’ and ‘bad religion’ being able to take over the state, causing Japan’s military madness. Associations between the idea of ‘state religion’ and Japan’s military and colonial past insinuated that Japan’s militarism had been caused by the lack of strict separation

between the ‘secular’ state and ‘religious’ groups. As argued by Thomas (2019, p. 165), ‘Following Holtom, Bunce turned the phrase “State Shinto” into an accusatory epithet. By juxtaposing governance with religion, the phrase highlighted an illegitimate form of religion-state relations, treating Japanese secularism as a heretical aberration and turning religious freedom into a universal norm.’

Moreover, as the term ‘*shin shūkyō*’, or ‘new religion’ replaced the more pejorative term ‘*shinkō shūkyō*’, ‘new fad-religion’, the members of *Shinshūren* embodied the idea of having finally gained ‘freedom of religion’, and were now providers of a ‘public good’ that could prevent the reoccurrence of ‘bad religion’. The largely arbitrary pre-1945 classification of ‘orthodoxy’ and ‘heterodoxy’ according to the categorization of evil cults, or *jakyō* (see Garon 1997), had impacted groups in *Shinshūren* to various degrees. However, this was not the result of having fought for ‘religious freedom’ (Thomas 2019).<sup>2</sup> William Woodard, the key Religious Division researcher and advisor to the Occupation forces, was apparently the person who advised *Shinshūren* to link their objectives with the notion of ‘religious freedom’ as a juridical principle and humanist ideal, so as to be more successful (Thomas 2019, p. 231). As Thomas summarizes, *Shinshūren*’s ‘shared objectives, namely: (1) to protect the freedom of religious belief; (2) to promote religious cooperation; and (3) to contribute to world peace [...] were sufficiently banal as to overcome any significant doctrinal differences between member groups, but they also reflect the premium placed on religious freedom in the wake of the war’ (ibid., p. 232).

I have discussed this background in some detail because while SG generally agreed with such ‘banal’ objectives, it did not join forces with *Shinshūren*. Firstly, this may seem straightforward because SG was a lay organization of Nichiren Shōshū, and, thus, was not at this point categorized as a ‘new religion’; secondly, it clearly had a different understanding of ‘religion’ as a categorization that did not necessarily mean sharing a conceptual basis. To SG, the classification ‘religion’ did not mean groups registered as ‘religions’, by that fact having more in common than they may have shared with other groups. Thus, there was a clear distinction being made between ‘form’ and ‘content’ (Simmel 1908), which meant that SG was closely allying itself as a lay organization of Nichiren Shōshū rather than remaining under the generic term ‘religion’, as part of a long history of some Nichiren groups insisting that doctrinal differences mattered. However, SG also insisted, unlike the Nichiren Shōshū priesthood, that the realization of Buddhist theory in actual behavior was the intended focus of Nichiren’s understanding of *kōsen-rufu*.<sup>3</sup> This meant that rather than priestly rituals or the construction of temples, the real significance of Nichiren Buddhism was to be found in being a ‘practitioner’, demonstrating theory via actual behavior. This difference in emphasis on ‘form’ and ‘content’ would eventually lead to a split between the priesthood and SG in November 1991 (see Bocking 1995).

Justification for putting ‘theory into practice’ was rooted in the ‘doctrinal purity’ by which SG interpreted Nichiren’s writings, in particular his treaty, the *Risshō Ankoku Ron* 立正安国論 (1260), or ‘On establishing the correct [teaching] for the peace of the land’, which became its mandate for propagation. As a lay group belonging to the 700-year-long tradition of Nichiren Shōshū<sup>4</sup>, it did not identify as a ‘new religion’ but instead as the ‘true’ practitioners of Nichiren, who promoted Nichiren Shōshū’s doctrines, a position that had made the priesthood a peripheral group within the various Nichiren sects. As the term ‘new religion’ became increasingly applied to SG by scholars and the media in the 1960s, SG generally became identified by sociologists as one type of ‘new religion’ distinguishable from other ‘new religions’ (Nakano 1996); the term ‘new religion’ has continued to be applied to explain SG (e.g., Kisala 1999; Shimazono 2004; McLaughlin 2018; Kato 2021). Paul Ingram (1969)<sup>5</sup> captures this mood and cites various media reports of representations of the SG–Kōmeitō relationship during the 1960s, even if his article contains various inaccuracies (for example, the view of Nichiren’s *honzon*, p. 163, or misinterpretations of the idea of ‘secret’, p. 164). In short, two different movements began in 1951: *Shinshūren*, which presented a publicly unified front, based on a shared ‘religious’ identity, now classified as ‘new religions’, which included organizations such as *Risshō*

Koseikai, Reiyukai, and Tenrikyo; and the other, Soka Gakkai, which aimed ‘to widely spread and declare’ the ‘correct’ teachings, or *kōsen-rufu*. The two key Nichiren groups, SG and Risshō Koseikai, another Nichiren group, often competed for legitimacy; however, Risshō Koseikai turned increasingly toward the Lotus Sutra and away from Nichiren.<sup>6</sup>

As discussed, within these new narratives, ‘new religions’ could present themselves as persecuted groups in the wake of a lack of ‘religious’ freedom, which became a perspective that would influence the scholars of ‘new religions’ for decades to come (see Nakano 1996; Thomas 2019). Public discourse on religion in the mainstream press, on the other hand, largely retained its pre-war language of ‘new fad-religion’ (*shinkō shūkyō* 新興宗教) and continued to stir up public sentiment regarding such groups as ‘heretics’ and a potential danger to mainstream Japanese society. Carol Gluck argues that castigating groups under the ‘new religion’ terminology was to set them up as Japan’s ‘Other’, against which the idea of ‘Japan’ could be constructed via a juxtaposition against its ‘metaphorical foreigner’ (Gluck 1985, pp. 132–38). Helen Hardacre shows the extent to which ‘contemporary public opinion about religion [ . . . ] emerged in tandem with the history of religion’s relations with the media over the twentieth century.’ The politicization of public opinion over the decades made it easy to create a public consensus (particularly after the Aum Shinrikyo attack in 1995) about the need for ‘ . . . the tightening of state monitoring of religions [in ways that] could be seen as the repudiation of democratic reforms inaugurated by the American-led Occupation [ . . . ] as part of an attempt to replace foreign-dictated legal frameworks with measures more in keeping with Japan’s history’ (Hardacre 2003, p. 136). Negative public opinions toward religion’ are borne out repeatedly in opinion polls. For example, in 1981, 71% thought negatively of religious organizations canvassing for candidates in elections, and similarly, in 1995, 61% found it problematic and only 30% thought it was not (Ishii 2007, p. 115; see also Ishii 2013). Thus, the narratives about ‘religious freedom’ and ‘new religions’ carried not only the possibilities for diverse groups to re-cast themselves in new ways but also showed the difficulty of legitimizing their presence, in the wake of an often-hostile mainstream press.

As the discourse on religious freedom cemented the idea that it was ‘bad religion’, i.e., ‘State Shinto’, that had been responsible for Japan’s military imperialism in its search for political power, these narratives come to play into the image of SG (see Ingram 1969, p. 156). By insisting on doctrinal ‘purity’ within the context of postwar Japan, where state institutions, big business, academics and publishing companies came to promote a public morality rooted in a national character profiling of the ‘Japanese’ as a people with a unique propensity for ‘wa’ or harmony (read: ‘tolerance’) (see Garon 1997; Goodman 2005; Goodman and Refsing 1992; Robertson 2005), SG’s ‘puritan’ approach that insisted on doctrinal difference made it look both highly ‘religious’ (read: fanatic) and highly ‘un-Japanese’ (read: intolerant). SG’s road to establishing a consciousness of human rights, based on the notion of inherent human ‘Buddhahood’, and the infinite potentiality that underpinned its notion of the ‘common good’ meant challenging the notion of ‘Buddhahood’ as something that one achieves upon death (still a common perception in Japan). This belief in inherent human potentiality was the meta-value to be translated into a justification for improving public welfare, which became the key policy platform of Kōmeitō. This value-orientation made SG’s identity as a movement, for those who joined, seemingly present the ultimate ontological answers to foster human dignity in Japan; it was also this shared philosophical premise that made sense when collectively supporting political candidates who were seen to embody such a mindset and policy objectives.

In the 1960s, the promulgation of Nichiren doctrine and support for the political party Kōmeitō, or the Clean Government Party, was frequently represented in the media in ways that insinuated SG signaled the rise of a ‘bad religion’ that sought the unification of ‘church’ and ‘state’. This position was most famously promulgated with the publication of Fujiwara Hirotatsu’s book, *Cut Off Sōka Gakkai*, in 1969. I discuss this in detail later in this paper. SG emerged as a rapidly growing and extremely well-organized ‘religious organization’, which also came to mean that millions of people who felt empowered by the practice of chanting



presented a highly organized vote-canvassing machine, which made Kōmeitō a force that could not be ignored. Its relative success in the 1960s was also borne out in moderate policy influences. For example, soon after its inception, in 1965, Kōmeitō highlighted the issue of corruption in the Tokyo Assembly; it was also instrumental in having the government address the environmental disaster resulting from the mercury pollution of certain factory outlets. As Kōmeitō rose to some prominence in the 1960s, becoming the third-largest party in the Lower House election of 1967, its purpose became increasingly questioned in the mass media, and it was dogged by assumptions about its ‘true’ intention in the political world being to make Nichiren Shōshū the state religion of Japan (see [Fujiwara 1969](#); [Ingram 1969](#); [Palmer 1971](#); [White 1970](#); [Nishiyama 1975](#); [Davis 1991](#)).

SG’s postwar mission to spread Nichiren’s ‘dharma’ of *nam-myōhō-renge-kyō* meant that it sought legal protection in the postwar constitution by registering as a Religious Corporation under the 1951 *shūkyō hōjinhō* (Religious Cooperation Law). It also increasingly used the term ‘religion’ to juxtapose itself as the ‘true religion’. As discussed in the next section, on a qualitative level, Nichiren’s ‘dharma practice’ never fitted the term ‘religion’ when envisaged as something outside the nature of human intention and action. SG maintained support for the institutional separation of ‘church’ and ‘state’ as a matter of course, but it did not take the view of ‘religion’ as something in any way separate from human action. I argue that this contested the common conceptual boundaries of ‘religion’ and ‘politics’ by which SG built its claim to be the ‘true’ representative of Nichiren. This resulted in a highly active form of individual and collective engagement, a kind of *zoon politikon* that, as defined by [Arendt \(1958\)](#), indicated ‘politics’ as speaking and acting for a ‘common world’, but that incurred much opposition from various groups.

In 1951, Josei Toda, then the newly inaugurated president of SG, wrote a series of articles under the title, ‘The History and Conviction of the Soka Gakkai’. In that year, SG also established its own newspaper, the *Seikyō Shimbun* (聖教新聞), which by its name indicated a news organ to carry ‘the teachings of the great sage’ (*seikyō*) of Nichiren Daishonin, as he was referred to in SG, and Nichiren Shōshū. Toda furthermore initiated a compilation of Nichiren writings to make them widely available and pledged, during his inauguration as SG’s second president on 3 May 1951, to achieve a membership of 750,000 households within the next seven years. This was a shocking target for most members, as they totaled only around 5000 at the time. Toda was often outspokenly critical of the thinking of *kōsen-rufu* as anything other than *shakubuku*—a method of proselytizing to refute ‘erroneous’ views and ‘eliminate attachment’ to opinions that are contrary to the ‘true’ Law (*buppō*). The term *shakubuku* was often translated by critics with its literal meaning ‘to break and subdue’, to connote that *shakubuku* involved some kind of physical violence. Toda also spoke against the assumption that achieving *kōsen-rufu* equaled establishing a national high sanctuary, or ordination platform *kaidan* 戒壇: ‘Some people confuse *kōsen-rufu* with the construction of the high sanctuary [...] *Kōsen-rufu* does not mean to build temples. Rather, we must understand that because we spread the True Law, we naturally need centers for activities. Then as a result, temples should be built’ ([Toda 1995](#), pp. 29–30). In these speeches, Toda was critical of those Nichiren Shōshū priests who were inactive in *shakubuku*, while expecting to have temples built for them, accusing them of seeing *kōsen-rufu* as the achievement of the building of a national ordination platform. At the same time, he also referred to the establishment of such a building in 1954 as pointed out by [Baffelli \(2009, p. 230\)](#). This was a response to marginal groups in SG and the Nichiren Shōshū priesthood who periodically would bring up this issue; such objectives were abandoned and discussed as not in itself a sign of *kōsen-rufu* as indicated by Toda in 1951 even as he addressed these voices in 1954. Kōmeitō never presented such an agenda but the fact that these marginal groups remained vocal and made these claims continued to bring the issue into the public domain (see [Nishiyama 1975](#); [Fisker-Nielsen 2012](#), chp. 2).

SG claimed that Nichiren Buddhism was instead supporting the ideal of ‘freedom of belief’ that had been promoted at the time as being something obtained through Japan’s defeat in 1945 and its subsequent Occupation. [Thomas \(2019, p. 198\)](#) shows how the

concept of ‘religious freedom’ became a key human right but was not merely the ‘making of religion’ by the Occupation: ‘Japanese scholars, politicians, policymakers and religious leaders [who] collaborated with the occupiers in making the language [ . . . ] intelligible, meaningful and enforceable [ . . . ], not simply a product of American thinking with existing propagandistic vocabulary’. In this way, ‘religious freedom became a human right as a result of a robust multilateral interactions in which all parties involved learned from each other as start to promote religious freedom as a human right’ (ibid.). This new rationale was also capitalized upon by SG, and it resonated with its own legitimation as an actor for human rights in the reconstruction of post-war Japan. As discussed in the coming sections, SG did not, however, see ‘religious’ beliefs as qualitatively different from other beliefs, even as it argued for its own ‘correct’ beliefs and interpretation of Nichiren doctrine.

#### 4. ‘Bad Religion’ as Challenger to the Status Quo

The notion of ‘bad religion’ in postwar Japan incorporates assumptions about the past ‘religious sectarianism’ that had supposedly ended up running the state. These assumptions became imbued in the notion of ‘State Shinto’, a postwar term that took on various meanings (see [Hardacre 2017](#)). ‘State Shinto’, as the example of ‘bad religion’, could also be used to demarcate ‘good religion’ as represented by those groups operating within prescribed religious-secular boundaries and expectations. For example, engagement in electoral politics was accepted as long as it did not mean support for only one political party. Various Buddhist organizations and ‘new religions’ that had not been forced to dismantle during the war saw their political candidates elected as early as April 1946, in the first postwar House of Representatives election ([Nakano 1996](#)). With the New Religious Federation, established in 1951, that included twenty-three different groups, Shinshūren also came to play an important role in supporting political candidates and the formation of the New Political Alliance of Japan in 1965. The liberty ensured by the Constitution of 1946 did not in the first instance assume ‘religion’ to be in opposition to ‘secular values’ ([Date 2016](#)). In fact, the constitutional scholar, Kanamori Tokujirō 金森徳次郎, in 1946 concluded that ‘Article 20 of the Constitution [that states] “No religious organization shall . . . exercise any political authority” . . . does not purport that those [religious groups] related to the political party are prohibited from taking political actions’ ([Shimizu 1976](#), pp. 424–25, as cited in [Date 2016](#), pp. 117–18; see also [Larsson 2017](#)).

That it was not considered unconstitutional for a ‘religious organization’ to support a political candidate or party has been maintained as the primary legal position until today ([Date 2016](#)). However, the association with ‘bad religion’ was often drawn with reference to SG’s support for one political party. Kōmeitō was established in 1964 by the then SG president, Daisaku Ikeda (1928–); by 1967, it had become the third-largest political party in Japan. Kōmeitō was far from in a position to compete seriously with the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) or the main opposition party, the Japanese Socialist Party (JSP), which framed the political landscape, but it was clearly perceived as a rising political threat. While SG had, initially, until the mid-1950s cooperated with various parties to support their candidates, as continues to be common in Japan, Kōmeitō represented itself as ‘the middle’ between the main right–left polarities of the LDP and JSP, and between the interests of big business and labor unions in a world dominated by Cold War politics. Kōmeitō cannot be seen to have ever promoted specific policies that would support SG; it also cannot be said to have a ‘clientelist’ relationship with its supporters, but instead to rest on a ‘moral’ one, based on a shared philosophy and purpose ([Bailey 1969](#); [Fisker-Nielsen 2012](#)). Their relationship hinged upon a shared value-orientation that aimed to improve welfare, medical provisions, and general policies to support the daily life of the lower and middle classes, while also engaging in international initiatives for peace (see [Fisker-Nielsen 2021](#)). However, Kōmeitō continued to be framed as a ‘religious’ party, seeking a ‘religious’ agenda postulated to be the establishment of a theocratic and fascist state ([Fujiwara 1969](#)).

SG’s use of Buddhist terminology, such as *ōbutsu myōgō* 王仏冥合, in the 1960s, made this assertion seem perhaps obvious against the episteme of the religious-secular binary

system.<sup>7</sup> *Ōbutsu myōgō* refers to the idea of ‘the non-duality of the sovereign and the Buddhist law’, or ‘the inseparability’ (*myōgō*) of ‘the law of the sovereign’ (*ōhō* 王法) and ‘the law of Buddha’ (*buppō* 仏法). Situated within modernist sensibilities that projected *ōbutsu myōgō* as constituting ‘religious-secular’ demarcations, critics of the SG-Kōmeitō duo, such as the high-profile case of university professor and later political commentator Fujiwara (1969) when he accused them of overstepping the Constitutional separation of ‘church’ and ‘state’ (*seikyō bunri* 政教分離), proposed that its supposed ‘true’ intention was to make Nichiren Shōshū the state religion. Indeed, various places in Nichiren’s writings seem to indicate this. In his writings, *The Three Great Secret Laws*, an essential tract in Nichiren Shōshū, he states that ‘when the secular [sovereign] law and the law of the Buddha are fused and in mutual accord’ (Nichiren 2006, p. 986), people will prosper.<sup>8</sup> When inquiring about SG’s modern translation of the thirteenth-century term *ōbō*, or ‘law of the sovereign’ as ‘secular’, in an interview with members from the SG study department, they explained that this refers to the ‘law or principles that govern society’.

While Kōmeitō’s policies could and cannot be distinguished as ‘religious’ in comparison with any other party’s policies, phrasing its rationale for electoral support for Kōmeitō as *ōbutsu myōgō* (Ikeda 1967) situated SG’s conceptual sensibilities clearly as being different from the ‘religious-secular’ classification. Kōmeitō has remained typically described as a ‘religious’ party, even as otherwise much more comprehensive studies have emerged, such as that by Ehrhardt et al. (2014); until such studies and, more recently, a paper by Liff and Maeda (2019), political scientists tended to largely dismiss the party because it was just a ‘religious’ party (see Introduction, Fisker-Nielsen 2012). Describing Kōmeitō as the ‘political’ arm of a ‘religious’ group was also a typical way to signal a picture of ‘improper’ relations and the potential danger posed by ‘religion’, which escalated during the 1990s (see McLaughlin 2012; Klein 2012).<sup>9</sup>

On the other hand, religious corporations are legal entities, and the extent to which they relate to political parties inevitably invokes questions about the meaning of the constitutional separation of ‘church’ and ‘state’. A ‘religious organization’ (宗教団体) is defined as one having the purpose of spreading a ‘religious creed’ (教義), to ‘conduct ceremonies’ (儀式), and ‘educate believers’ (教化育成).<sup>10</sup> The legal dictum in Article 20 of the Japanese postwar constitution points to the institutional ‘separation of state and church’.<sup>11</sup> However, this separation of ‘church and state’ institutionally is not the same as so-called ‘religious’ adherents not being allowed to participate in electoral ‘politics’. If that were the case, there would be a need to supervise the citizen’s freedom of expression, to be in line with what the state promotes. This would run counter to a democratic system of governance and resemble pre-war times. Article 20 of the Constitution has so far been taken to indicate that for religious organizations to support political candidates or parties is not illegal but instead a prerogative, like that of any citizen (see Date 2016). Against the discourse on religion, the association with overstepping the legal boundaries of ‘church’ and ‘state’ is easily made. There is a presumed difference as to why people engage in electoral politics; the term ‘religion’ implies a form of transgression of boundaries when found in the context of ‘politics’. The dynamics of these presumed boundary ‘impurities’ highlight the paradigmatic and ideological nature of the term ‘religion’ as part of ‘secular-making’, which tends to obscure or silence a focus on the actual content of policies. This raises questions about the way that ‘authority’ exists in discursive representations, here, arguably, to undermine alternative voices that, by referring to ‘religion’, can be presented as lacking the ‘proper’ credentials for participation in Japanese public life, even as ‘religious’ creeds or specifics are not invoked. As pointed out by Gluck and Hardacre, referenced earlier, the ‘making of Japan’ is intertwined with constituting what in fact represents a significantly more diverse Japan, which would be dismissed as the ‘religious’ Other.

SG’s audacity in regarding itself as having the right to participate in collective activities was also compounded by the fact that most SG members, coming from what, at the time, was considered the lower classes, were regarded as ‘masses’ of poor people who somehow dangerously taunted the ideals of democracy (White 1970; Palmer 1971). There were

sentiments expressed in extremely alarming ways in Fujiwara's book, *Cut Off Sōka Gakkai* (Fujiwara 1969), discussed below. Looking at SG's participation within these prominent discursive relations of power, the terms 'religion' and 'secular' were used to demarcate perceptions and sentiments about who was or was not a 'rightful' and 'legitimate' actor. This is visible in the fact that SG's support for Kōmeitō was not portrayed as controversial because of the content of its policies but rather for its supposedly 'religious' motivation, namely to supposedly want to construct a state-sanctioned ordination platform or unite Buddhism with the polity. Nakano (1996, p. 125) sums up this sentiment judged against the secular-religious binary discourse when he says Kōmeitō aimed 'to become a moderate humanist party with roots in the masses ... from the religious idea of ōbutsu myōgō ('a polity fundamentally united with Buddhism')' meant 'the party definitely possessed, then, a strongly religious character'. Baffelli (2009, p. 224) who quotes Nakano argues that SG's fundamental reason for establishing Kōmeitō was essentially to achieve such a state-sponsored ordination platform.

Using the term 'religion' in this way reifies SG as having a 'religious' essence. Such a layering of abstract terminology, what Bourdieu referred to as 'objectivism' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Wacquant 2007), ends in a largely tautological argument and created the kind of scholarly discourse to which SG needed to subsequently respond. SG's furthering its humanitarian objectives as a mass movement, of course, was never going to be a straightforward or simple project, particularly within the scope of which SG imagined its engagement, and the way it grew to encompass a vast variety of people, some of whom also included those conservative voices that advocated for the ordination platform as a pivotal issue. However, whether the aspiration for pushing a 'humanitarian' agenda in government and the endurance of this 'humanist' voice in Japan is best understood within the taken-for-granted assumptions of 'impropriety', as still implied by the term 'religion', is a question pursued in this paper. Adaptations and committed support for Kōmeitō span now more than five decades; this cross-generational commitment has allowed the party to become a relatively successful force now recognized as a voice of 'moderation', although its vision, now within coalition politics of the past two decades, is arguably less clear; nevertheless, it is clearly driving attempts to refocus the public debate on policy detail over identity politics. This has proven particularly significant during times of fragmenting political debates when binary emotional rhetoric became predominant, as seen during the recent security laws of 2014–2015; the appeal of the policy substance of Kōmeitō over identity politics, while simultaneously being a clear disadvantage to itself in terms of public perceptions, had a significant impact on actual policy outcomes (Fisker-Nielsen 2016; Liff and Maeda 2019).

### 5. The 'Buddhist Law' Is Found in 'Human Behavior'

The terminology that SG used in the past to explain its support for Kōmeitō, of *ōbutsu-myōgō*, literally means the non-separability of the 'law of the sovereign' and the 'law of Buddha'—*ōbō* and *buppō*. As pointed out earlier, in the 1960s, this signaled a threat of the institutional unification of 'church' (i.e., Soka Gakkai) and 'state' (i.e., Kōmeitō), and the potential rise of another 'bad religion' driving Japan to some sort of constitutional crisis (Fujiwara 1969). While marginal groups within SG and Nichiren Shoshū continued to voice the objective of establishing a nationally-sanctioned 'ordination platform' which signaled a supposed desire to make Nichiren Shoshū the state religion (see Nishiyama 1975; Fisker-Nielsen 2012), the establishment of Kōmeitō by Ikeda, and with the promise of SG electoral support was, I argue, an attempt to promote particular 'humanistic' values. This can be seen in the 'internationalist' outlook that called for Japan to recognize its wartime past, and the call to include China into the international community (Fisker-Nielsen 2021). SG's meta-values meant promoting the premise that all humans possess inherent dignity and deserve respect as individuals.<sup>12</sup> This was promoted as the key message and 'Buddhist' practice of the Lotus Sutra and Nichiren. Such meta-values naturally carry much room for interpretation as to how this is expressed in personal behavior. Yet the perspective that the



‘Buddhist law’ is something to be communicated in embodied behavior and intention, rather than ‘something’ from another realm, passed on from a Buddhist master to his designated disciple, challenged the idea of the Buddhist dharma as it is commonly understood. That this perspective was then carried into collective action for political representation, aiming to deliver material provisions for better welfare, education, and environmental protection, entailed millions of different human stories. In this paper, I necessarily focus more on the way that SG’s motivation was evaluated, along with the modernist classification of the ‘religious-secular’ binary system.

Some argue that such classification also existed indigenously. Kleine discusses the concepts of ‘the ruler’s law’, *ōbō*, and ‘the Buddha’s law’, *buppō* (Kleine 2013, p. 20), as a reference to a much longer preexisting binary between ‘things that belong to this world’ and ‘those which transcend the world’. He equates the ‘ruler’ and the ‘Buddha’ with an immanence-transcendence binary system, arguing that this resembles the Western binary system of the ‘secular’ and the ‘religious’. Kleine argues that this shows that the indigenous conceptualization of modern ideas on the ‘religious-secular’ binary already existed much earlier in Japan. By contrast, Horii (2016, p. 263) maintains, as I have done in this paper, that this projects modern ideas onto the past: ‘The historical surveys indicate that medieval Japanese distinctions such as *seken* [世間 this world]/*shusseken* [出世間 out of this world] and *ōbō-buppō* are, in fact, very different from the transcendence–immanence binary or religion–secular dualism.’

The SG’s notions of *ōbō* and *buppō* appear fundamentally different from the modern demarcations of the ‘secular’ and ‘religious’, which is not a demarcation found in the theory of *ichinen sanzen* that takes a cosmological view of ‘monism’. Yet this did not mean that SG advocated a model for the unification of institutional powers; on the contrary, a cosmological view of interconnectedness was never seen as being the same as the way institutional activities should be organized in electoral politics. In fact, the central dynamics of *buppō* as a theory and practice of ‘monism’ highlight the way a concept like *ōbutsu myōgō* cannot be fully understood within the ‘religious-secular’ binary or the ‘immanence-transcendent’ binary because the system of classification essentially differs. Yet within the Japanese context, where the ‘Buddhist law’ relates to ‘sovereign law’ (the laws of the ‘rulers’), which more precisely refers to the legitimation of certain hierarchical relations of power in the Japanese ruling, a distinction can obviously be made between how the ideals of equality and human dignity are envisioned to be possible and how it differs from such a ‘world system’. While this may appear in the first instance to map onto the modern notion of the ‘religious-secular’ binary system, this conceptualization seems to add on a new ‘objectivist’ layering that may not be particularly helpful as a form for analysis.

Generally, the primacy of the Imperial Law, *ōbō i-hon* 王法為本, versus the primacy of *buppō ihon* 仏法為本 refers to the ancient tension in Japanese history between the subordination of the ‘Buddhist law’ to the imperial law/or law of the ruler (Tokoro 1965). The traditional roles of Buddhist institutions were as subordinates to the ‘laws of the ruler’, typically presenting their ideological function in the way they presented themselves as protectors of the ruler and his domain, *gokoku* 護国, by the efficacy of their ritual powers. As shown by Sato (1999), Nichiren subverted that hierarchy and regarded establishing ‘true Buddhism’ as the way to ‘establish the peace of the land’, not through the performance of rituals for protection of the state but by a conceptual change in outlook and an internal change in mindset, or ‘heart’ (*kokoro*). That is, believing in the universal ‘Buddha nature’ could become a viable value-orientation to create a ‘reality’ by which a better life-world could be achieved. A much-read Nichiren writing in SG states: ‘The body is the place of the ninth consciousness,<sup>13</sup> the unchanging reality that reigns over all of life’s functions’ (Nichiren 1999, p. 832). The state of the ninth consciousness or the ‘Buddha consciousness’, is seen, unlike many alternative perspectives on this topic, not as something to be found externally or by a special ‘transfer’ of the ‘dharma’ from someone else. The only route to ‘Buddha’ consciousness is through ‘belief/faith’ on an individual level. This ‘faith’ (*shinkō* 信仰) is what is seen to facilitate a transformation of ‘life-state’ that may have been

dominated by the negative emotions of greed, anger and ignorance, the ‘three poisons’, or *sandoku* 三毒 that are regarded as the driving force of a narrow focus on self-interest.

This principle of inner transformation, which in SG terminology is referred to as ‘human revolution’, is what Toda in 1952 called a project for transitioning to ‘Global People-ism’ (*chikyū minzoku shugi* 地球民族主義). Ikeda goes on to refer to this as ‘global citizens’ (*chikyū shimin* 地球市民) (Ikeda 1996), or ‘world citizens’ (*sekai shimin* 世界市民) (Garrison et al. 2014). As outlined in his speech on education in 1996 at Columbia Teachers College, he promoted ‘Buddhism’ as fundamentally a ‘cultural’ and ‘social’ engagement to bring out inherent creative potentiality, fundamentally hindered by fear. ‘Courage’ to combat this fear is regarded as a crucial characteristic of ‘Buddhahood’. Interviews and conversations with SG members show this as a recurrent theme, for example, it is also here expressed by a woman in her 30s in a discussion meeting in West Tokyo: ‘Buddhahood requires tremendous courage, to have faith is to have courage to believe in this potentiality Buddhism explains exist in all people; this is the most challenging, to believe in this in myself.’ Members can often be found to describe chanting in such terms as ‘developing courage’ to act and speak in ways that may differ from their habitual ways of thinking and acting, where they can recognize that ‘I am just being fearful of how others think of me [as to why this person does not take action]’. While ideas of ‘global citizenship’ were articulated in less universalized language in earlier decades, before the split between the Nichiren Shōshū priesthood and SG in 1991 (see Bocking 1995), ‘faith’ and ‘courage’ were also seen during Toda’s time in the 1950s as a mindset necessary to transform a ‘smaller self’ concerned with more narrow self-interest. ‘Courage’ to confront this ‘smaller self’ was presented as an attribute of ‘Buddha’ behavior and was set within SG as presenting a history of fighting for justice, which is deeply intertwined with SG’s critical view of Japan’s imperial history, where it faced its own persecution (Ito 2009; see also Gebert in this volume). This history also translated into the nature of support for Kōmeitō as a party for ‘peace’ and support for the structures of international governance; it also drove its constant *shakubuku* (proselytizing) campaigns, something for which Ikeda also apologized (Ikeda 1967).

Such existential, philosophical, and practical implementation, whereby Nichiren doctrines were interpreted as the fostering of ‘courage’ as a vital existential element for ‘value-creation’, or *sōka*, were to become the mainstay of the SG’s language and self-referencing, driving the organization as a gathering of people seeking such deeper connections with others. This is summed up by this oft-quoted passage from Nichiren: ‘Shakyamuni taught that the shallow is easy to embrace, but the profound is difficult. To discard the shallow and seek the profound is the way of a person of courage’ (Nichiren 1999, p. 447). From the perspective of cosmopolitan ethics, a capacity to ‘live’ according to what they perceive as ‘global citizenship’ is the meaning of becoming ‘human’ in its fullest sense (Ikeda 1996); ‘Buddhahood is about becoming truly humane and feeling this common humanity’, as a young man about to start his first job at a trading company explained in December 2021. Of course, the extent to which SG, as an organization simultaneously set within Japanese patriarchal mores, could live such ideals of ‘universal dignity’ or ‘common humanity’ is an ongoing empirical question with mixed findings.<sup>14</sup> In addition, the extent to which both the SG members and the organization lived these principles, in the context of other Japanese conventions and practices of a highly gender-stratified society, remains visible in the organization, where its own bureaucracy is a challenge.

The 1990s saw an increasing reference to ‘Buddhist Humanism’ that was expressed as the ‘wisdom’ and ‘courage’ to perceive potentiality and to transform life-states dominated by sentiments of fear; in the 2000s, a new way of framing this became expressed as deciding to ‘hope’ (Ikeda 2017). ‘Hope as a decision’ is now a well-established sensibility among contemporary SG groups, where members ‘decide’ to root their actions in a kind of empathetic imagination that carries the values of ‘moral cosmopolitanism’. This became particularly visible during the COVID-19 pandemic (Fisker-Nielsen 2020). This framework has fostered a sensibility that drove increasing numbers of young people to join SG internationally,

currently promoting the SG organization as a self-empowering Nichiren Buddhist practice and a movement rooted in the practice of *buppō*, whereby one can affect human behavior and social environments, which are seen to intertwine. ‘Nichiren Buddhism [is thus seen as] a teaching of active engagement in creating a better ‘society’ (read: human behavior)’, as was explained by some members in a discussion meeting (online) in West Tokyo in January 2021. Here, they were paraphrasing and then, below, quoting Ikeda’s editorial from their monthly study magazine, the *Daibyakurenge* (Big White Lotus), which was always used as the key study point at the monthly discussion meeting:

‘Nichiren Buddhism is a teaching of active engagement with society; it looks directly at society and seeks to transform it for the better. It is not divorced from the reality of “worldly affairs”. Nevertheless, many in Japan, past and present, have the idea that Buddhism is distinct or removed from worldly affairs, something unrelated to daily life. This is partly because the established Buddhist schools regarded the Buddha as a transcendent, supernatural being and distinguished the religious from the secular in various ways. This led to some Buddhist schools assuming an aura of mysticism and authority that they used to hold themselves above the secular world and exert control over people’s lives. Nichiren Daishonin, in contrast, declares: “The minds of living beings are and have always been Buddhas” (Orally Transmitted Teachings, p. 208). Nichiren Buddhism teaches that the Buddha does not dwell in some distant realm far from the real world, and that in fact we all inherently possess the noble life state of Buddhahood and can draw forth that power from within to overcome our real-life struggles.’<sup>15</sup>

This kind of ‘de-exoticizing’ Buddhism into a philosophical practice, to be realized in behavior and ‘worldly affairs’, could be seen by outsiders as praying ‘for benefits’. There is an overwhelming assumption that chanting is performed to pray *to* an object that ‘makes wishes come true’, a kind of Japanese Buddhist ‘god’ or kami who can bestow good fortune, as is commonly seen around Japan. While there may of course be SG members who chant in this way, and sometimes people talk about changing this way of chanting, what is repeatedly stressed in SG throughout its literature is that Nichiren inscribed his *honzon* as an ‘object of devotion for observing the mind’ (Nichiren 1999, p. 354). SG members reported to me that this process of chanting to ‘observe the mind’, or *kokoro* (heart-mind), was experienced as a deepening sense of ‘inner expansion’ or feeling of ‘life-power’ (*seimei ryoku* 生命力), ‘feeling courageous’, ‘feeling wiser’, and feeling ‘increasing levels of goodwill towards others’, of becoming concerned with and wanting to ‘contribute to society’.

In the early postwar decades, millions of people were attracted to such experiences that felt ‘self-empowering’; this also drove what was often seen as ‘overzealous’ *shakubuku* campaigns. This experience of internal change led to energy being poured into addressing ontological questions and was directed by Toda and Ikeda into developing an ‘international-oriented’ outlook, a kind of ‘moral cosmopolitanism’ that was promoted as a different way forward for Japan. The support for Kōmeitō became one important outlet for this ‘cosmopolitanism’ and energy, poured into what were new ideas at the time. The 1960s growth of SG coincided with Japan’s economic boom years, when many people experienced upward social mobility and SG consisted primarily of newly urbanized working-class people. Through their membership in SG, they developed a sense of ownership toward the political system that differed from other political ideologies of the left and right wings at the time. As a ‘social’ practice that was deemed ‘religious’, but that did not seek ‘contact’ with an ‘invisible other’ (Luhmann 2020), the focus on expressing a deeper sense of self, or ‘bigger self’ (*taiga* 大我), expressed simultaneously a different vision for society. SG’s confrontational style of proselytizing and garnering votes for Kōmeitō, as observed by White in the 1960s, was largely presented in negative terms by the mass media. White, however, also observed that ‘... belief means new volition in work, new devotion to family, a new pattern and order in life, and a new sense of responsibility toward society’ (White 1970, p. 272). The use of ‘society’ here, as a reified presumed collective good, was the standard by which SG activities became evaluated.

While it was and is common in Japan for ‘religious organizations’ to collectively support individual politicians, SG’s exclusive support for one party, which may have carried a message of ‘middle-way’ (*chūdō* 中道) politics with a focus on improving welfare and education, nevertheless entered a fierce competition with both the left and the right wings. When Ikeda advocated that the Japanese government should overcome its arrogance, which he argued underpinned Japan’s foreign policy, in a much-publicized address in 1968 (see Ikeda [1968] 2013), he promoted the view of remorse and repentance for the wartime abuses of Asian neighbors that went well beyond the common sentiments, general attitudes, and expectations of a ‘religious’ organization (see Fisker-Nielsen 2021).

Such assumptions were brought to bear in full in a ‘public spectacle’ that had enduring effects on the perceptions of SG and Kōmeitō. In 1969–1970, what came to be called the ‘speech suppression affair’ (*genron shuppan bōgai jiken* 言論出版妨害事件) came about when the academic and political commentator, Hirotatsu Fujiwara (1969), published a book entitled, *Cut Off Soka Gakkai* 創価学会を切る. He accused SG, in its support for Kōmeitō, of being both a ‘communist’ and ‘fascist’ threat to democracy that should be literally ‘cut off’. This controversy erupted, as SG leaders, whom Fujiwara had interviewed for his book, called upon him to correct errors and misinformation in the manuscript that they had been sent before publication. Moreover, the leader of Kōmeitō, Takeiri Yoshiatsu, apparently called the LDP general secretary Tanaka Kakuei to ask him to speak to Fujiwara. This resulted in Fujiwara further accusing SG of trying to suppress freedom of speech. The situation was exacerbated when some SG members who were employed in bookstores urged the owners to withdraw the book from their stores. Altogether, the situation intensified into a public scandal, wherein the SG was accused of being against ‘freedom of expression’, which effectively enhanced Fujiwara’s argument that SG was a threat to democracy. This altercation took place against the backdrop of the rising presence of Kōmeitō in the political world; Fujiwara, who worked closely with the LDP, seemed to have been part of an attempt to undermine the credibility of Kōmeitō. This was also the first time that an election had the limited use of television as a means of campaigning, which brought these issues into a wider focus for the voting public.

Despite the accusation of opposing ‘freedom of expression’, the general election of 27 December 1969 saw Kōmeitō increase its number of seats from 22 to 49. This was never to be achieved in a Lower House election again; the LDP also increased its seats for MPs by 11, taking close to 48% of the votes, while Kōmeitō polled close to 11%. Most of the increase in seats, however, were of those taken from the JSP, who lost 50 MPs (see Curtis 1971). While Kōmeitō did well in this election, the ‘speech suppression’ incident was to haunt the image of SG as an organization against freedom of expression and as one sensitive to criticism. This sentiment was expressed to me during my Ph.D. fieldwork of 2003–2004, when I interviewed an academic who was teaching journalism about their perception of SG and Kōmeitō; he expressed the view that although he knew the case had been overstated, ‘journalists hate being told what to do’, and explained that the SG’s atypical approach of not keeping quiet but instead confronting negative media-reporting had established an image of it being overly sensitive to criticism (Fisker-Nielsen 2012). At the time, the situation forced SG to make a public statement that it was ‘separating’ from Kōmeitō; Ikeda apologized for causing trouble to the public in a speech at the following monthly SG general meeting in 1970. However, he maintained that ‘politics is not the only aspect of society. Religion originally represents an attempt to address the core issues of human culture in its entirety’ (Ikeda 1970). This represented the idea of *ōbutsu myōgō*, attempting to broaden and legitimize the idea of *buppō*, now self-referenced as ‘religion’ to indicate that ‘religion’ was human beings’ historical attempts to solve their societal problems.

In this way, ‘human expressions’ of ‘solutions’ to suffering or happenings in life, their soteriology, was perceived as driving, historically and philosophically, the search for explanations regarding meaning in life; the term ‘religion’ did not thereby indicate something ‘beyond’ human mindsets, practices, and experience but instead a form of knowledge about the world. ‘Religion’ was, thus, a profoundly human undertaking.



Nichiren's emphasis on 'human behavior'<sup>16</sup> and Buddhist practice as the action that carries possibilities to behave as an ethically autonomous person was here emphasized as the definition of what 'religion' was.

## 6. The Dharma as Defying Karma and the 'Spirit' of the *Risshō Ankoku Ron*

Nichiren's concept of 'dharma' is derived from the theory of *ichinen sanzen*, depicting the conditions or mechanism by which a person's life-state intertwines with their environment (see Fisker-Nielsen 2018). There are many arguments made against the idea of 'Buddha nature' for example in the debates that erupted within so-called Critical Buddhism (Matsumoto 1989; Hubbard and Swanson 1997; see Heine 2001 for an overview), and re-counters (King 1991), which space will not allow me to delve into here in any detail, apart from pointing out that King argues that 'Buddha nature' should not be seen so much a substantive ontology as a soteriological device (see King 1991). This may resonate with how the principle of *ichinen sanzen*, upon which the idea of 'Buddha nature' rests, is a possibility as an existential condition. That is, mind-spirit, imagination, attitude, outlook, intention, and values are seen as not being substantive in themselves but, at the same time, as substantively impacting actions and reactions in the process of human interaction, conventions, and norms, which underpin the term 'society' in the quotation by Ikeda above. As argued by Asai (1999), belief and faith in universal Buddhahood is the existential state by which to understand Nichiren's view of humanity. It also contains the idea of change as an embodied inner dimension, whereby a person can cut through their habitual ways of thinking and acting; this, in short, presents Nichiren as thoroughly anti-positivist.

On various levels, this brings to mind Pierre Bourdieu's *Practice Theory*. While this theory does not contain a prescriptive idea of 'Buddhahood' as a potentiality, it comprises ways in which the individual is seen as the embodiment of mindsets rooted in particular symbolic structures, within which the search for social status that gives the individual their sense of dignity tends to re-produce the familiar order of life. Wacquant (2007, p. 264) sums up Bourdieu's practice theory as 'social action, structure and knowledge [that] is resolutely monist and non-dualistic'. 'Life-state' and 'karma', in SG language, resemble Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*, the embodied disposition developed through socialization and practices rooted in specific values and institutionalized norms (Bourdieu 1989). 'Habitus' could, in this way, be compared to the idea of 'karma', which in SG is seen as a constant process of making causes through thought, words and actions. 'Karma' (*shukumei* 宿命) as habitus is, here, both performative and constraining, created by and producing a 'destiny' that becomes long-term stratified tendencies and consequences. Being able to actively challenge such 'karmic' tendencies (*shukumei tenkan* 宿命転換) is the process referred to as 'human revolution' and possible through a change in life-state. SG was significantly successful in challenging common sentiments in Japan, whereby 'destiny' (*unmei*) is typically seen as something over which one has no control and to which one must give oneself over. Challenging 'destiny' was typically expressed via the popular idea of 'changing poison into medicine' (*hendoku iyaku*) that resonates throughout SG literature and history; it was a prominent sentiment and attitude expressed during the recent 2020-2022 COVID-19 pandemic (see also Fisker-Nielsen 2020). These modern interpretations of Nichiren's well-known treatise, the *Risshō Ankoku Ron* 立正安国論 (1260), 'On Establishing the Correct [Teachings] for the Peace of the Land' (Nichiren 1999, pp. 6–32), is expressed as 'the spirit to transform for the better the actual land in which we live' (Ikeda et al. 2003, p. 187).

Over the decades, SG maintained that the *Risshō Ankoku Ron* (RAR) was Nichiren's central text because he demonstrated here his practice of believing in universal 'Buddhahood'. The RAR was a proposition to the ruling powers of his time to uphold the principles expressed in the Lotus Sutra as a way out of the disease, disaster, and war that characterized his time. Using the RAR, SG strove to promote the 'correct teaching' that humans should work to base themselves on this principle of universal 'Buddhahood'. Nichiren (in)famously argues in the RAR against other 'teachings' of his time with their 'wrong' soteriological devices, such as believing that rebirth in the 'pure land' of Amida would

lead to salvation; in fact, he saw such ‘wrong’ beliefs as the cause of profound human suffering, war, and pestilence; this was unlike the Lotus Sutra teaching, he argued, which pointed to existential solutions as manifesting in a ‘belief’ in universal Buddhahood, no way to overcome the human tendency to be ‘ruled’ by the emotions of arrogance, greed, and ignorance, the ‘three poisons’<sup>17</sup> that were seen as the cause of self-destructive tendencies. Rooted in such interpretations of the RAR, SG sought to create a movement with the objective of establishing ‘Buddha consciousness’ as a principle for action on a broader level. When for example, as already mentioned, in September 1968, Ikeda made a public call for normalizing diplomatic ties with China, there was no reference made to any Nichiren text or principles, but he challenged the Japanese government’s position toward China by pointing to the ‘arrogance’ he saw underpinning its foreign policy, manifested in Japan’s lack of remorse for its past military invasion and colonialism (Fisker-Nielsen 2021).

SG’s founding of Kōmeitō, and the perception as their ‘pro-China’ stance, produced certain counter-mobilization measures during the 1960s. For example, Shinshūren, which was led by SG’s rival, Risshō Kōseikai (a namesake of RAR), filed a single candidate in the 1965 Upper House election to try to counter the perceived threat from Kōmeitō (Asahi, 5 July 1967, quoted in Klein and Reed 2014, p. 215). Shinshūren had, in the past, supported various LDP candidates; by contrast, the 1965 candidate was the leader of Shinshūren, Kusunoki Masatoshi 楠正俊 (1921–2007)<sup>18</sup> (see Klein and Reed 2014, p. 218). Kusunoki had previously worked for the Ministry of Education’s General Affairs Division, before resigning in 1951 to take part in the formation of Shinshūren, of which he later became the director. In 1965, he was recommended by Shinshūren, was elected in the national constituency of the LDP House of Councillors, and was to serve three terms. Known as a hawkish member of the LDP and as part of the conservative policy group, Seirankai, he was also recommended for election by the then-Prime Minister Sato. Sato took a hard-line anti-China stance; he later sent Kusunoki as an envoy to Taiwan to mend political ties in 1973 after normalization with China. Kōmeitō’s different approach to the ‘China question’ (see Fisker-Nielsen 2021) that was to make Kōmeitō central in negotiating the treaty for normalization with China in 1972, also made SG a frequent target of right-wing protests, something that has continued to the present day, although today it appears in much-subdued forms.<sup>19</sup>

McLaughlin (2014) argues that it was ‘religious’ goals that drove SG members’ active support for Kōmeitō during the 1960s, concluding that ‘Soka Gakkai lost more than power among the electorate when it severed official ties with Kōmeitō and renounced goals to build a national ordination platform’ in 1970 (ibid., p. 77). However, it is doubtful if such ‘religious’ goals were ever the main driving force, and Kōmeitō never promoted such objectives. The 1970 ‘renouncement’ that came in the wake of the Fujiwara scandal highlights instead the discursive power by which the religious-secular binary could be yielded. To see SG as losing much of ‘its combined religious and political dynamism [that it had] up to the 1970s’ (ibid., p. 78) as a result of re-stating, as it had repeatedly in the past, that it had no aim to build a national ‘religious monument’ seem, at the least, overstated. In the 1970 announcement of the Kōmeitō and SG ‘separation’, Ikeda reiterated long-stated conclusions that the objective of *kōsen-rufu* was not to establish a national ordination platform. This incident illuminates how SG navigated its ‘religious’ status within multiple discourses and geopolitical issues that framed its ‘true’ intention via a ‘religious’ label. Indeed, SG did, in the early postwar years, talk about a national ordination platform (see Fisker-Nielsen 2012, chp. 2), but, as pointed out by Klein and Reed (2014), the continuous claim by opponents that Kōmeitō aimed to construct such a nationally sanctioned monument, which somehow would make Nichiren Shōshū the state religion, was clearly exaggerated. Instead, it seems likely that as a ‘conglomeration of lower social elements’ (White 1970, p. 6), its ability to organize and mobilize millions of people during elections was indeed perceived as ‘dangerous’ and as a potential threat to the status quo, amid fierce electoral competition for influence.

## 7. 'In the End, Secular Matters Are the Entirety of Buddhism'

As discussed so far, the meaning and practice of *buppō* challenged the construct of 'religion' as something that could be understood within a 'religious-secular' binary system. The concept of *buppō soku sehō* 仏法即世法 expressed 'an inseparableness of sovereign law and the Buddhist law'. As discussed, this was not a reference to the specific institutions of 'church and state' needing to co-exist, but rather articulated the idea that the 'Buddhist dharma' is not divorced from daily actions. In this way, SG challenges the idea of Buddhism as existing only in special rituals, rites, or places, which remains the common perception in Japan today. In a reference much quoted in SG, Nichiren states: 'No worldly affairs of life or work are ever contrary to the true reality' (Nichiren 1999, p 1126). Nichiren here makes a reference to the Lotus Sutra, and states that 'in the end, secular matters [世法, or the 'laws' of the world] are the entirety of Buddhism [仏法, the Buddhist law]' (ibid.). Through such reasoning, SG challenged the idea of 'Buddhism', and, by extension, 'religion' as pertaining to anything but human behavior.

Luhrmann (2020) starts her recent book, *How God Becomes Real*, by pointing out that theories about 'religion' seldom include what she sees as key features: 'First, religion is a practice in which people go to the effort to make contact with the invisible other. Second, people who are religious want change. They want to feel different from what they do.' The second point seems to be applicable to almost any experience, from the buying of cosmetics to exercising, to holidaying. If we take her first point about an 'effort to make contact with the invisible other', then what happens when the discourse of those deemed 'religious' does not contain the notion of the 'invisible other'? Prayers in SG are not to 'make gods and spirits become and remain real to people' (Luhrmann 2020, p. x), but are instead an ontological quest for 'inner enlightenment'. The chanting of *nam-myōhō-renge-kyō* that most SG members do every day is summed up as the experience of an 'enhanced sense of being present in the world', 'feeling self-empowered', 'energetic', with a 'stronger sense of willpower', 'determination to win first and foremost over myself [lower life-states]', 'feeling more compassionate and patient', 'realizing I needed to change my attitude', 'becoming aware of my own habitual ways of thinking that lead me into repeating certain behavior'. Many such similar descriptions, and millions of experiences related by members, share the common theme that a 'raised life-state' affects their thinking and feeling and relations with themselves and others in positive ways; these narratives of the efficacy of chanting, and study material to be found amongst SG members, create a hegemonic discourse suggesting that positive 'resolutions' can be achieved through the effort to bring forth the 'Buddha nature' from within. In the absence of 'seeking contact with the invisible other' or efforts to make 'real' gods and spirits, as argued by Luhrmann (ibid.), SG members, quite counter-intuitively, chant to be more 'present' in the world by enhancing their *seimei ryoku*, 'life power', or *riki* 力, which is one of the Ten Factors that form the theory of *ichinen sanzen*.

Support for Kōmeitō, as with any other activity for SG members, involves raising their 'life-state'. From observations and interviews, it is clear that Kōmeitō politicians draw a sharp line between their 'religion' and their position as politicians; they cannot be found to speak as practicing Soka Gakkai members. However, a deeper sense of trust characterizes their relationship with their supporters. This trust toward Kōmeitō is built upon a shared understanding and the hope that their decision-making in the world of government will be based upon this deeper sense of 'goodwill' that they are also believed to experience from their chanting, even though they never talk about this. Kōmeitō politicians 'usually appear energetic and are seen to show their sincerity in the way they speak and behave', one man in his 50s from Saitama explains in relation to this sense of trust. One woman in her late 40s, from central Tokyo, expresses her trust in Kōmeitō as:

'While policies need to further our objective for a better society, such as finding ways to support vulnerable people, I also have a sense of trust towards most Kōmeitō politicians, probably also because I know the local ones personally, and they are all good people who have people's interest at heart.'

Another woman in her 50s, from north Tokyo, expressed the opinion that it was clear to her:

‘... how hard Kōmeitō politicians work to realize policies such as free school fees or free medical care for high school students, for example; I can see them at work in the community. I never speak to any of them about being members of Soka Gakkai and they never talk about this directly. But, I feel from their behavior that they are good people, and we have a common purpose. Also, having supported and campaigned for Kōmeitō for a long time, I know I can trust them to work to contribute to improving society.’

A young man in his early 20s, from Fukuoka, explains that:

‘... we study their policies, and although I can’t always see how different they are from other political parties in terms of their policies, I kind of trust that they will keep their promises because this is what I am being told by my seniors. I am also a Soka Gakkai member and we probably have a sense that we are working together to contribute to a better world.’

A young woman in her early 20s says:

‘Yes, I support Kōmeitō. I am not quite sure why, but my mum is really involved, and she tells me Kōmeitō is a party that works for people, so I trust her, and therefore kind of trust Kōmeitō even if I don’t know them really. I need to study their policies more and make a comparison with other parties.’

Support for Kōmeitō resonates with a particular ‘common sense’ or belief that they are in politics to further a ‘humanist’ agenda. The sense of shared value-orientation is something built up under Ikeda, through the dominance of his hundreds of writings on ‘Buddhist Humanism’, and the way his actions are being represented as a model for global citizenship. This, at times, displays a certain worship of him personally rather than the principles he expounds, but his interpretation of Nichiren Buddhism and his yearly Peace Proposals to the UN<sup>20</sup> shape a common outlook on the world that tends to enhance support for Kōmeitō, as they use the same language, seen to implement ‘humanist’ ideals as a model for civic engagement. In the Japanese context, as explained by a long-term male employee of SG, ‘Kōmeitō is there to help further a practical vision for the common good.’

Their canvassing activities continue to be deemed ‘too political’ to be classified as a ‘public good’. Perceptions of a ‘public good’ deemed appropriate for religious organizations relate closely to what is described by the famous religious studies scholar, Shimazono (2004), in his praise of temples at a lecture hosted by the Buddhist Federation: ‘the conservation of tradition’ itself carries a public good; rephrasing this, it is the maintenance of ‘good’ as the maintenance of traditional values (quoted in Horii 2018, p. 207). Institutions as ‘social carriers’ of traditional values here differ from SG’s notion of ‘public good’, even if SG, in its own employment structures, replicates the typical patriarchal gender divisions of labor. SG has a different concept of ‘public good’ that is fundamentally rooted in its broader notion of *kōsen-rufu*, or spreading the ‘correct teaching’. This was repeated in a message in July 2021 by the current SG President Harada:

‘... the word ‘fu’ does not mean expansion of membership only. It also refers to correct social decay and to open a new era where people play a leading role and advance into all areas of politics, education, the arts and the flowering of the Mystic Law [*myōhō*] of Humanism. This ‘flow’ itself is *kōsen-rufu*.’<sup>21</sup>

He continued to explain what ‘correcting this social decay’ may mean, and how this concretely links to the then-upcoming general election:

‘In other words, because as a religious movement our support activities [for Kōmeitō] are to first and foremost realize ‘a humanist politics rooted in the compassion of the Buddhist law, we must do our own human revolution. In other words, through expanding the boundaries of oneself by making prayers



[chanting] our foundation, believing in the buddha nature of all people, we can overcome all differences and expand our friendship. Then, we can connect through the buddha state, and the understanding and sympathy for the Gakkai will expand.’<sup>22</sup>

The SG understanding of ‘public good’ and achieving ‘human revolution’ are closely interlinked; this also creates high expectations of Kōmeitō politicians, as one woman in her 40s explains sharply, in relation to a national Kōmeitō politician being found to have spent money in hostess clubs in early 2021:

‘We expect them to behave according to the principles they expound of working for the people. We do not use the common way of addressing politicians in Japan as Sensei (teacher) but simply use san (Mr. or Ms.) to indicate they are not above us. Corruption and sex scandals are totally unacceptable. They should not live differently from ordinary people.’

The focus on how individual behavior links to the kind of ‘society’ they want to see also breaks down some of the common boundaries of ‘self’ and ‘other’, and, clearly, the idea of the ‘secular’ and the ‘religious’. As SG members engage in garnering votes for Kōmeitō, they also chant to achieve their ‘human revolution’ and for successful interactions with others that result in getting people to vote and to broaden their understanding of what Kōmeitō is trying to achieve, ultimately, and what their support is for, i.e., their ‘humanist project’. At the level of feeling a deeply connected sense of consciousness that underpins their imagining of the possibility of this ‘common good’ and ‘goodwill’ as a driving force for action, support for Kōmeitō as a political party means that the content of policies must be in line with broader ‘humanist’ values perceived to contribute to the ‘common good’. Kōmeitō, by and large, has, over the decades, been able to realize various objectives and establish itself as a ‘humanist’ party, although it is still typically described as a ‘religious’ party and is often perceived as ‘boring’, with few charismatic politicians who do not toe the line. However, it is also seen as a stable and moderate force in Japan that can impact policies in an informed way (Mikuriya 2015). SG members who support Kōmeitō chant about their support activities, just as they chant about all other aspects of their lives, with the aim of raising their own ‘life-state’ so as to feel a deeper connection with themselves and with the people they ask to vote for Kōmeitō.

Over the years, hundreds of interviews and many more conversations with SG members who support Kōmeitō, with some recent ones from 2021 as quoted above, reveal how a particular value-rationale for supporting Kōmeitō politicians, who are perceived to, and who seem to, share a common philosophical base, have built a relationship of trust wherein supporters observe and interact with local representatives who are usually very active in their own communities. Unlike the usually imagined ‘public good’ characterizing religious organizations, such as volunteering or participating in community activities (which SG members frequently also do), canvassing for Kōmeitō is an activity that more directly links to government power. The RAR typically meant, for many outside SG, a promotion of sectarianism ‘thought to imply the unification of the country under a single religion’, as Ikeda states (Ikeda et al. 2003, p. 72). Instead, for SG members, as Ikeda stresses, ‘the principle of “establishing the correct teaching for the peace of the land” reveals the proper relationship between the state and religion’ (ibid. 73). This arguably has proven a fairly apt assessment, as well as a recipe for relative success over half a century of SG support for Kōmeitō, which has allowed an increasingly significant voice of moderation in public life otherwise often characterized by binary identity politics (Fisker-Nielsen 2016; Liff and Maeda 2019).

## 8. Conclusions: *Buppō Soku Sehō* in Relation to Kōmeitō Now

So far, I have argued that the key to understanding Soka Gakkai members’ engagement in electoral activities is to think about it as their participation in a broad commitment to a ‘public good’ that aims to carry into public life a value-orientation for improving welfare

and a more ‘humane’ order for a ‘dignified life’. This is what is meant by *buppō soku sehō*, or the ‘inseparableness of sovereign law and the Buddhist law’. Both the term ‘religion’ and the idea of the ‘Japanese’ are concepts problematized through the lens of SG. Problems with ‘critical religion’ have been cast as the essentializing of the national identity of the Japanese. For example, there is no single attitude toward shrines; to some, they indicate past militarism (Larsson 2017, pp. 240–43), while to others, they indicate Japanese culture, while again, to others, they carry little significance. It has long been argued that ‘the Japanese’ is just as highly problematic a designation as the term ‘religion’ (see, for instance, Yoshino 1992; Goodman and Refsing 1992; Befu 2001; Robertson 2005; Goodman 2005). Within a discourse on religion, chanting for the success of electoral outcomes may seem peculiarly ‘religious’, as well as peculiarly ‘un-Japanese’; SG election activities continue to be described as something SG members consider part of their ‘religious’ activities (see, for example, McLaughlin 2014, 2018) and thus are easily side-lined as somehow overstepping a reified ‘purity’ of the ‘secular’ realm. SG’s relative success as an organization that under Ikeda fostered a rational-ethical framework, which, in the context of Japanese national history, meant standing for policies that could inform government decision-making alongside a broader philosophical frame. This was rooted both in interpretations of Nichiren as representing ‘Buddhist Humanism’ and also the United Nation’s human rights framework for international governance. While no specific reference in Kōmeitō policies was ever made to Nichiren doctrine, nor were concepts ever seen as being directly applicable to actual policies (Aruga 2000), its policies can also not be said to specifically benefit SG members, apart from in a general sense as groups of people consisting primarily but not exclusively of the lower-middle to middle classes.

The rationale for supporting politicians and a political party in Japan has, since Kōmeitō’s inception, been rooted in ideas about ‘humanistic politics’; Kōmeitō has broadly stayed the course of ‘middle-way’ politics while adapting to shifting political and geopolitical issues. From recent first-hand observations of town-hall meetings in Tokyo, started as a new initiative in 2019 (and continuing online in 2020, 2021 and as of January 2022), Kōmeitō’s local-level politicians try to demonstrate their significance as daily ‘caretakers’ of local districts in Japan. Attending such meetings, one can observe the details involved, and how these local politicians are significant in terms of addressing local concerns, such as the quick administering of COVID-19 vaccinations once this was approved by the central government, and typically serve as a point of contact for local people to reach the national government. That they make themselves so available to be contacted by local people is often a surprise to potential voters, who typically have never thought of going to their local representative as a way to get issues addressed. Trust is built into this relationship, which projects trust toward national representatives even if there are examples of occasional scandals. It is clear that supporters perceive ‘politics’ as not so ‘far from them’, which is otherwise a typical sentiment expressed as the reason for why people feel that mainstream political parties in Japan have nothing to do with them, and why over 50% are unaffiliated voters. SG members, on the other hand, tend to trust that the politicians they support will work to alleviate a variety of issues in ways that seek to improve the daily lives of people, due to the nature of Kōmeitō policies and their closer proximity, generally, to their supporters.

The term ‘religion’ has often been used in the following way by Ikeda, who here expressed in 2021:<sup>23</sup>

‘People who think that progression is an internal feeling, wishing only for personal safety, is not true faith. Nichiren taught the Buddhist Law not just for himself, but for each person to solve their anguish and become happy, and for society to achieve security and peace.’<sup>24</sup> (Ikeda 2021)

He further exhorts: ‘It is precisely by believing in the fundamental power of our lives that we can surmount the sufferings of birth and death’ (Ikeda et al. 2003, p. 29). How this resonates in collective public life, referred to here as ‘society’, is something I have attempted to explore in this paper. Nichiren has been consistently taken as rejecting

notions of ‘faith’ (信仰) as something other than having strong confidence, trust (信用) or conviction, and a ‘determination’ (決意) to direct one’s mind and actions to believe in universal ‘Buddhahood’, seen as the attitude by which to create ‘value’ and the way to contribute to a broader ‘common good’ that can advance a sense of human dignity. Specifically, this paper has explored how SG took Nichiren Buddhism as a practice to be manifested in individual behavior, while simultaneously engaging in a broader and long-term project of collective action to transform conventional norms and values toward a ‘humanist project’ arising from a belief in and experience of ‘Buddha consciousness’. The extent to which this can be said to have been successful will be part of ongoing empirical investigations. Long-term fieldwork, interviews, and doctrinal analyses undertaken for this research highlight how the socially productive term ‘religion’ became a counter-episteme to promote the ‘*Risshō Ankoku Ron*’ and the idea of *kōsen-rufu*, with mixed results. Aiming to bring a belief in a state of ‘Buddha’ consciousness to bear on collective action did not, however, entail contesting the modern institutional separation of ‘church’ and ‘state’; rather, it was an attempt to find legitimacy for participating in ‘Japan-making’ in ways that went beyond SG’s demarcated status as a ‘religion’.

This paper has necessarily been limited in historical scope, in an attempt to discuss on a deeper conceptual level how SG members, both historically and in contemporary terms, have negotiated and contested critical academic forecasts and negative media reporting that presented them as examples of sectarianism, as a potential threat to ‘Japanese society’ and as potentially unfit for democratic participation. This paper approached the Soka Gakkai–Kōmeitō relationship not as a model or ideal type of ‘religion’ and ‘politics’, but rather as a historical lens that makes visible some of the processes of modern boundary-making, aiming to legitimize or de-legitimize ‘difference’ as worthy or unworthy of participation in ‘public’ life. Public representations of ‘boundary-breaking’ and assumptions of ‘political-religious impurities’ highlight the fierce competition in defining the narratives by which public actors can be deemed rightful participants in the shaping of broader directions in Japan.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> This is summed up here by Nichiren quoting that: ‘Volume Five of the Great Concentration and Insight states: “Life at each moment is endowed with the Ten Worlds. At the same time, each of the Ten Worlds is endowed with all Ten Worlds, so that an entity of life actually possesses one hundred worlds. Each of these worlds in return possesses thirty realms, which means that in one hundred worlds there are three thousand realms. The three thousand realms of existence are all possessed by life in a single moment.”’ (Nichiren 1999, p. 354)
- <sup>2</sup> See Gebert (this volume) for the case of Sōka Kyōiku Gakkai.
- <sup>3</sup> *Kōsen-rufu* 広宣流布: This is a term from the 23rd chapter of the Lotus Sutra that literally means to ‘declare and spread widely’. This term is extensively used by Nichiren, who saw himself as a votary of the Lotus Sutra, with the mission of *kōsen-rufu*. This meant propagating his teaching of *Nam-myōhō-renge-kyō* that he defined as the way to experience the enlightened state of ‘Buddhahood’. *Kōsen-rufu* specifically refers to propagating the view of the Lotus Sutra that all people are endowed with the supremely noble Buddha nature. The purpose of spreading the Mystic Law is seen to lie in fostering such an ontological worldview and practice.

- 4 Referred to as the Fuji School before 1912.
- 5 This article is available here <https://nirc.nanzan-u.ac.jp/nfile/3221> (accessed on 25 November 2021).
- 6 Risshō Koseikai increasingly moved away from its Nichiren Buddhist roots to a focus on the Lotus Sutra (see Dessi 2018).
- 7 See Ingram (1969) for a good example of the ‘religious-secular’ binary system used to translate various concepts.
- 8 戒壇とは王法仏法に冥じ 仏法王法に合して王臣一同に本門の三秘密の法を持ちて (1022).
- 9 My article, “The making of representations of religious adherents engaged in politics” (2011), is an ethnography of a press conference that took place at the Foreign Correspondents’ Club in Tokyo, three days prior to the October 2003 general election. The famous and regularly appearing political ‘guru’ Takao Toshikawa (<https://insideline.co.jp/profile-2/>) (accessed on 20 December 2021, here presented the unwelcome but deciding issue as the ‘SG-Kōmeitō factor’, with SG members doing anything as obedient ‘religious’ foot soldiers. Toshikawa has been one of the journalists promoting a longstanding critique of SG and Kōmeitō in numerous articles over the decades.
- 10 For the definition of ‘Religious Juridical Persons’, see [https://www.bunka.go.jp/english/policy/religious\\_institutions/](https://www.bunka.go.jp/english/policy/religious_institutions/) (accessed on 29 January 2022).
- 11 The Japanese Constitution [https://japan.kantei.go.jp/constitution\\_and\\_government\\_of\\_japan/constitution\\_e.html](https://japan.kantei.go.jp/constitution_and_government_of_japan/constitution_e.html) (accessed on 30 December 2021).
- 12 This mindset can be seen in Ikeda’s now four decades of peace proposals to the UN. <https://www.daisakuikeda.org/main/peacebuild/peace-proposals/pp2021.html> (accessed on 2 January 2022).
- 13 The ninth consciousness, or amala-consciousness, is the Buddha nature, seen as a fundamentally purifying force, which Nichiren equates with *Nam-myōhō-rengē-kyō*.
- 14 See McLaughlin (2018) for a perspective from the periphery/older generation of the organization; see Fisker-Nielsen for a perspective from younger members.
- 15 They were here quoting and paraphrasing from ‘The Buddhism of the Sun—Illuminating the World. Advancing Our Movement by Demonstrating the Principles of “Faith Equals Daily Life” and “Buddhism Is Manifested in Society,” A Teaching of Active Engagement in Society’, in the January 2021 issue of *Daibyaku Renge Study Journal*, published by Soka Gakkai.
- 16 Nichiren writes: ‘What does Bodhisattva Never Disparaging’s profound respect for people signify? The purpose of the appearance in this world of Shakyamuni, the lord of teachings, lies in his behavior as a human being.’ ‘Nichiren (1999, p. 852).
- 17 Ikeda stresses that ‘it is not simply about people taking faith, but whether or not they can use Buddha wisdom to realize happiness for people. This is Buddhist Humanism which is about creating and widening human solidarity; *buppō* has nothing to do with a narrow dogmatic focus. It is about saving people from the three poisons [*sandoku* 三毒] of greed, anger and ignorance that is seen to underpin so much of human society now’.
- 18 Accessed 26 September 2021. <http://yoshizuka.com/index.php/2021/06/11/saturday-june-11-1921-masatoshi-kusunoki-a-later-member-of-the-house-of-councillors-was-born/>.
- 19 In the past, whenever Ikeda would attend a big SG event or a graduation ceremony at Soka University, right-wing trucks would circulate with large Japanese flags, blaring out loud Japanese military music from loudspeakers, or would criticize Ikeda for being a traitor to Japan. During my initial Ph.D. fieldwork in 2003 and 2004, such right-wing protest groups could be seen intermittently near Soka University campus or the SG headquarters in Shinanomachi; now, living near the university campus, I hear them every two to three weeks on Sunday mornings.
- 20 Peace proposal link: <https://www.daisakuikeda.org/main/peacebuild/peace-proposals/pp2021.html>. (accessed on 2 January 2022).
- 21 広宣流布とは、単に学会員の拡大を意味するだけではありません。社会的腐敗を正し、民衆が主役の時代を開くために、政治、教育、芸術など、あらゆる分野に進出し、妙法の人間主義を開花させゆく、その“流れ”それ自体が、「広宣流布」であります。(Harada at the July 2021 general SG meeting).
- 22 すなわち、私たちの推進する支援活動は、「仏法の慈悲を根底にした人間主義の政治」を実現するための、宗教運動の一環であり、だからこそ、まず何よりも、私たち自身の人間革命—言い換えれば、祈りを根本に、全ての人の仏性を信じ抜き、あらゆる差異を超えて友情を広げる中で、自己の境涯を広げゆく実践こそ、根本中の根本であります。そして、そこにまた、仏縁が結ばれ、学会への理解と共感が広がっていくのであります。
- 23 As expressed here in the monthly study magazine, the *Daibyakurenge* (大白蓮華2021 August, p. 64).
- 24 信仰とは、自分の安らぎだけを願い、個人の内面に止まるものとする人が、本当の信仰とはそうではありません。自身はもとより、一人一人が具体的に現実の苦悩を解決し、幸福になること、さらに社会が安穏、平和へと導いていく一日蓮大聖人の仏法は、そのために説かれたのです。(大白蓮華2021 August, p. 64).



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